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ABSTRACT

Learning to read and write is a social as well as a cognitive undertaking, and children are literally driven to learn language because of their need to communicate. Just as children go though stages in learning to talk, they go through similar stages when learning to read and write. Literacy learning is also rooted in the culture of the child and in the family. Today, educators talk about emergent literacy curricula which focus on meaningful experiences with print. Children as writers learn about the recurring, generative, and flexibility principles and pass through "sign and message" and constructive stages of writing development. Reading aloud to children, independent reading on a daily basis, and literature study groups are some of the many ways to involve children in literacy experiences. There are many opportunities at home and at school for parents and teachers to promote literacy. Dramatization is another way to expand children's use of language. Parents and teachers need to know that children understand a lot about literacy through daily interaction with people around them. Parents and educators can build on children's desire to learn and encourage them as they learn to be effective communicators. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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Young Children And Literacy Development

by

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YOUNG CHILDREN AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

DR. MERILEE A. ROSBERG

Literacy learning is an ongoing process. Children learn laguage because they need to communicate. Learning to read and write in our society is also a necessity in order to communicate with others.

The author examines emergent literacy and how children become readers and writers. Maningful reading and writing experiences are discussed and explored.

YOUNG CHILDREN AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

DR. MERILEE ROSBERG

Children in the United States come to school with a great deal of knowledge about oral and written language. They live in a print-filled culture and are immersed in signs, newspapers, magazines, and books.

Literacy learning begins early and is ongoing. Children become aware of logos around them such as the large M for McDonalds. This environmental print is meaningful to the child. "As children search for patterns and make connections, they bring what they know to each new situation and apply their own childlike logic to make sense of it (Galda, Cullinan, and Strickland, 1993, pp. 74-75). Learning to read and write is a social as well as a cognitive undertaking, and children are literally driven to learn language because of their need to communicate (Goodman, 1986).

READING AND WRITING AS A DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS

Learning to read and write is also a developmental process. Just as children go through stages in learning to talk, they go through similar stages when learning to read and write. Cambourne and Turnbill (1987) discuss "approximation" when children learn to speak. The child may say wa wa for water. This same concept is apparent when they begin to write. The beginning writer writes brd for bird. The child's writing is an approximation of adult writing.

Literacy learning is also rooted in the culture of the child

and in the family. In some cultures there is a strong oral tradition and reading and writing may not be as important. In looking at different families, some have many books in the home and children are read to on a daily basis. Other homes may have few books and these children may not have as many experiences with books and print. Long before formal instruction begins, however, children are exposed to print and gain an awareness of the importance of written language.

EMERGENT LITERACY

In the past, educators spoke of learning to read and write from a readiness point of view. Teachers provided pre-primers and readiness worksheets. Today we talk about emergent literacy curriculum which focuses on meaningful experiences with print. Teachers and other adults speak of providing an environment where children can be exposed to print in a variety of ways. Teachers provide books, magazines, signs, paper for writing and drawing, and samples of adult writing.

"Children who see the functional relevance of print are more likely to be motivated to explore its use for their own purposes" (Galda, Cullinan, and Strickland, 1993, p. 79). It helps children to learn if they know the reason for learning. Caregivers and teachers who read stories to children and discuss purposes for writing aid children in learning to read and write. Children discover that learning to read print unlocks the door to reading stories, letters, and newspapers. Children also discover that they can communicate with others through writing their own

stories and letters.

Reading and writing go hand in hand. As children learn to write, they develop phonemic awareness. The development of phonemic awareness leads to more successful reading. Through writing and looking at story books, children begin to learn the structure of written language. They learn that English is written from left to right and top to bottom. They discover how to open a book and to turn the pages from the "front" of the book. In looking at books, they become familiar with story structure and the need for a beginning, middle and conclusion to a story. In short, they become conscious of how language works.

At first children are not aware of symbolic meanings. As they begin to draw, they gradually learn that their graphic representation is not an object but a symbol of that object. When they first begin to tell stories using a book, they look at the pictures to tell the story. Later they learn that it is the words that one reads to tell the story. Letters are another type of symbol. Through exploration children discover the principles of print.

CHILDREN AS WRITERS

When children first begin to write they repeat the same elements such as a line or circular movement. This is the recurring principle when the same strokes are repeated over and over. Next children learn about the generative principle. They learn that there are rules for combining elements in writing and they begin to string letters together. Then in the sign and

message stage children come to understand that graphic symbols carry a message. This is an important step toward literacy. As children experiment with writing, they disover that letters can be varried to produce new letters. A P can be t ransformed into a B. This is the flexibility principle. Lastly in the constructive stage children begin to perceive likenesses and differences between letters and words. They begin to compare and contrast written forms (Galda, Cullinan, and Strickland, 1993).

Children's concepts about the relationship between meaning and form are very complex and change as they have opportunities to use written language. When they first begin to write, they do not associate the marks they make with specific phonemes. They do not realize that letters represent sounds in words. By age five, however, most children have a limited understanding of the alphabetic principle that links letters and sounds. They begin to write "words" using features such as beginning and/or ending sounds. Around age six they start to use phonetic spelling. They list all of the sounds that they hear in a word such as "aligatr" or "brd." During the next stage children use phonics but also visual cues and rules they have learned. They realize that a vowel is needed in every syllable. Around age eight or nine most children are using conventional spelling. They know some of the basic principles of English spelling and have a fairly large spelling vocabulary.

When working with young children, teachers and parents should encourage children to use invented spelling. As children

match letters to sounds, they become independent writers. It is also important to encourage reading because it is through looking at print that children learn the conventional spelling of words. Individualized spelling dictionaries can aid the child who is learning to spell. Each child should have his/her own booklet where words are listed alphabetically as they are used in writing.

READING AND WRITING EXPERIENCES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

There are many ways to involve children in literary experiences and adults need to provide various types of reading experiences. (1) Reading aloud is an important component of a literacy programme. Teachers must make time each day to read aloud to children. It establishes a reading community and provides a way to share thoughts about life (Smith, 1990). (2) Independent reading on a daily basis is critical because children are able to choose their own books and to practice reading. Blocks of time should be provided at a regular time each day. (3) Literature study groups where children can come together with the teacher to discuss a book in depth is another type of reading that allows children to express their ideas and feelings and to listen to opinions of others.

In her article "Creating a Community of Learners," Short (1990) talks about the importance of creating a community where children are free to form relationships and to discuss ideas with each other. Learners come to know each other and to value what each has to offer. The focus is on problem solving, inquiry and

sharing responsibility. Children learn to become much more reflective about what they read and write as they share their ideas with each other.

There are many opportunities at home and at school for parents and teachers to promote literacy. Many families keep a list of needed groceries. Children can watch as this list is written and parents can read the items. At times children may be encouraged to add one or two items to the list. Cooking experiences both at home and at school provide demonstrations of literacy. Before baking the parent or teacher can read the recipe with the children. A list of needed supplies can be made and children can help with the purchases. During the baking process the adult and children read and follow the recipe together.

Another demonstration of literacy is letter writing. Teachers can write a brief note to a parent in front of the child (hopefully a positive note). The parent can respond with a short note. Children cen be encouraged to write letters to pen pals or relatives. They can also send messages to peers in their class. This allows children to see a reason for writing and gives them opportunities to practice writing.

Reading good literature to children on a regular basis seems to be one of the most important things that parents and teachers can do to enable children to become successful readers. With young children books should be attractive as well as related to the child's experiences. Illustrations should aid the child in

understanding and enjoying the story. In other words, illustrations should match the text. Read a variety of literature including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Children enjoy books that have rhyme, rhythm, and repetition. Books with these characteristics are easier for children to remember and they enjoy the rhyme and rhythm.

Read new books to the child, but also repeat favorite stories and encourage the child to retell the story or to "read along" with you. When stories are repeated chidren become familiar with the story and with story structure. It gives them time to think about the language and the meaning of the story. Gradually they learn to make comparisons between familiar stories and even to improvise and tell their own story.

Dramatization is another way to expand children's use of language. Children enjoy dramatizing a text such as "Who Sank the Boat?" by Pamela Allen or "Mrs. Wishy-Washy" by Joy Cowley. The opportunity to be actively involved appeals to young children who learn through their senses. Adults can provide simple props or children can build items such as a boat with blocks or large boxes. Children use language as they prepare and plan to act out their story. They learn to use appropriate language and body movements as they tell the story.

CONCLUSION

Learning to read and write is a developmental process, but adults can help children by being aware of how they learn. Bobbi Fisher, a kindergarten teacher, summarizes her beliefs about how

young children learn (1991). She believes that children learn best in natural situations and when learning is kept meaningful, interesting, and functional. They learn best when they can make their own choices and are able to work in a supportive and non-competitive environment. They need many opportunities to talk with others, to read and to write. The teacher provides the supportive environment and gives children plenty of opportunities to read and write and to share their stories with one another.

Don Holdaway (1986) discusses a classroom model for natural learning. This model includes demonstration, participation, practice, and performance. The teacher demonstrates by reading a book or writing a short story. The children participate as they read along with the teacher or dictate a story. Then the children have opportunities to write their own story or to practice through role play. The last step is performance. Children need opportunities to read their stories or perform their plays for an audience. The audience may be classmates, another class, or parents. Holdaway's model provides a framework for learning.

Parents and teachers need to know that children understand a lot about literacy through daily interactions with people around them. They learn naturally and for practical reasons. They want to communicate. We can build on this desire and encourage children as they learn to be effective communicators.

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